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Review of Die Welt Im Übergang: der diskursive, subjektive und skeptische Charakter der Mappamondo des Fra Mauro (Heidelberg, 2014) by Nikolaus Egel

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NIKOLAUS ANDREAS EGEL, *Die Welt im Übergang: Der diskursive, subjektive und skeptische Charakter der "Mappamondo" des Fra Mauro*. (Beiträge zur Philosophie, Neue Folge.) Heidelberg, Germany: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2014. Pp. 498; 13 color figures. €54. ISBN: 978-3-8253-6214-0. doi:10.1086/685579

Die Welt im Übergang, which can be translated as "The World in Transition," is based on the author's doctoral thesis. As indicated by the subtitle, Egel argues that Fra Mauro's *Mappamondo* (Venice, c. 1448–60) reveals a "discursive, subjective, and skeptic character." The worldview of the fifteenth century was characterized by tensions because of the influx of hitherto unknown information about the world and its inhabitants, such as travel accounts by Portuguese and Venetian travelers and the rediscovery of Ptolemy's *Geographia*, which contradicted existing dogmatic and authority-based geographical knowledge. In the texts inscribed on his map of the world, Fra Mauro intended to connect "old" with "new" using his knowledge of older sources of authority, together with an increasingly receptive attitude toward these new geographical sources. (15). By presenting evidence from different sources on an equal level in the legends on the *mappamondo* Fra Mauro revealed the contradictions between them. Often he had to decide himself which of the opinions he thought to be the most plausible for himself and his readers. This "discursivity" in his presentation of the legends gives them a "subjectivity" that can be characterized as the result of a "skeptical attitude" (16–17). The *mappamondo* can be seen as a "panopticon of different possible interpretations of the world" (279).

In order to explore this thesis more profoundly Egel first describes the intellectual context of Fra Mauro's Venice and, in the second part, the different types of information that shaped his *mappamondo*: medieval *mappae mundi*, marine charts, travel accounts, and the works of classical geography studied in humanist circles in Florence and Venice. The third and largest part of the book discusses the representation of knowledge on Fra Mauro's *mappamondo*, especially his attitude towards firsthand knowledge as opposed to the works of classical geographers and geographical knowledge inherited from the Middle Ages.

Egel's book testifies to his broad reading and is well documented with historical documents and academic publications, including nineteenth-century scholarship. However, in several cases Egel recycles uncritically outdated knowledge that has already been disproved. For instance, he presents as an established historical fact that the map made by Paolo dal Pozzo Toscanelli (c. 1470) was constructed "on the empirical basis of travel accounts, and on which he replaced the network of compass lines of Portulan maps for the first time by the right-angled grid of meridians and circles of latitude" (50), while referring to the reconstruction made by Hermann Wagner in 1884. This has been sharply criticized in later scholarship and, based on the available historical documentation, for instance, Patrick Gautier Dalché has rejected it recently as the "Toscanelli legend" (2009, 268–72), but none of this is mentioned by Egel.

Egel's book has more serious shortcomings: for instance, information that contradicts the author's thesis often goes unmentioned. In order to demonstrate that the Hereford *mappa mundi* is a "compilation of sources from antiquity and the early Middle Ages," devoid of any empirical information (94), Egel gives an overview of the map's sources (95–105). However, Scott Westrem (2001, xxxiv–xxxvii) quotes another important source in his edition of the Hereford map, not mentioned by Egel: the *Expositio mappe mundi*, dating from the late twelfth century and partially based on directly obtained geographical knowledge.

Egel also quotes my book (2007) in order to sustain his description of the exclusively theological and spiritual nature of medieval *mappae mundi*, but he withholds from his readers an essential part of my argument, namely that religious knowledge and exegetical

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readings continued to shape the design and reception of maps of the world until the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.

Marine charts are characterized by Egel as being concerned with “the practical question of how one can travel easiest from place A to place B, in order to pursue political, economical, and military interests. A very modern project” (113). The systematically underscored opposition between “monastic” (61) *mappae mundi*, drawn according to “the church authorities and sacred scripture” (72) and practical marine charts has been qualified by most researchers in the field as an outdated historical commonplace. It would have been interesting to see Egel challenge this historical consensus through an engagement with the sources, but instead, Egel’s assertions about the different perception of reality that shapes marine charts are supported by his citation of only one German publication (58).

It is also strange that some central issues are relegated to the footnotes, most importantly the question of whether Fra Mauro’s attitude is truly skeptical, or whether he builds further on scholastic debate techniques (55, 197). Although Egel does point to the syllogistic structure of the legends on the map, he skips over this crucial question by writing that discussing it “would go too far.”

Egel’s discussion of Fra Mauro’s engagement with different and sometimes conflicting information is strongly underpinned by a priori assumptions that travel accounts are necessarily “empirical” (116), that Fra Mauro’s attitude testifies to a “new world view” (303), and that he tacitly criticizes all religious *auctores* (267). It would have been more interesting to read a carefully balanced evaluation of Fra Mauro’s ambivalent attitude toward his sources, because sometimes he does not reject the traditional authorities—for instance, in the legend about the “formige grandissime” (giant ants) in Asia. Being a Camaldolese *converso* (not a monk, as repeatedly stated by Egel), it is also highly questionable whether Fra Mauro intended to demystify a religiously inspired view of the earth and the cosmos. It would also have been interesting to see Fra Mauro’s approach related to other historical examples of “*mirabilia* checking” that show a distrust of firsthand accounts and contestation of classical authorities, such as the writings of Gervase of Tilbury and the examples discussed in Anthony Grafton’s *New Worlds, Ancient Texts* (1995), which is surprisingly not quoted. Egel’s book leans heavily on the publications by Piero Falchetta, Angelo Cattaneo, Marica Milanese, Patrick Gautier Dalché, Nathalie Bouloux, and Ingrid Baumgärtner, but has very little to add to them.

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JEAN-BERNARD ELZIÈRE, *Le décodage des chansons de geste et des romans courtois (XI^e et XIII^e siècles)*. Brussels: eTalent and Las Vegas: Redhills Ventures, 2013. Pp. 775; 120 color plates. €62. ISBN: 978-2-9527506-0-8.
doi:10.1086/685648

While at first the book seems to open interesting new perspectives, the reader soon starts to feel simultaneously exasperated and frustrated: the author has invested a considerable amount of energy and imagination in his research, he masters a huge amount of information, especially in the historical field, and his erudition at times is mind-blowing, all for a completely aberrant result that does not bring anything to the study of the texts.

Elzière’s main idea, his breakthrough theory (according to the author), is that “literary” texts are encodings of a radically different, historical substrate. He claims that he has painstakingly analyzed each of his examples and has discovered the referent behind the code. However, since this minute work of decipherment would be boring for the reader, he considerably offers only the blunt conclusions he has reached, sparing us the intermediary

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